

‘The Lucky Ones’

Ruth Franklin

Several groundbreaking new books chronicle the fate of the quarter-million or so Polish Jews who evaded Hitler only to wind up in the hands of Stalin.

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Reviewed:

In the East: How My Father and a Quarter Million Polish Jews Survived the Holocaust

by Mikhal Dekel
Norton, 433 pp., \$18.95 (paper)

Survival on the Margins: Polish Jewish Refugees in the Wartime Soviet Union

by Eliyana R. Adler
Harvard University Press, 433 pp., \$49.95

Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back: A Memoir of the Gulag

by Julius Margolin, translated from the Russian by Stefani Hoffman, with a foreword by Timothy Snyder and an introduction by Katherine R. Jolluck
Oxford University Press, 578 pp., \$39.95

My maternal grandparents were people who had suffered. Even in my earliest memories, their faces are deeply lined, their hair sparse. My grandfather, a tall man, was perpetually stooped, his chest sunken; my grandmother’s knuckles were swollen with arthritis. Each wore a full set of dentures. Their expressions brightened when they looked at me, their only grandchild. But when no one was watching, their features would settle into the grim stoicism of those who have endured extreme hardship and can never be confident that it will not descend upon them again.

That they were victims of trauma was unquestionable. Born in central Poland in the 1910s to different branches of the same family, they fled east when Hitler invaded in 1939, leaving behind siblings and parents who decided to stay. On the journey they endured torture and humiliation at the hands of the SS before escaping into eastern Polish territory newly occupied by the Red Army. And here things get murky.

As best I understood their story, pieced together in a bare outline from interviews I conducted with them as well as years of dinner-table conversation—“When we were in the camp,” my grandmother might say before launching into an anecdote—the Soviets asked if they wanted to stay in the USSR or return to German-occupied Poland. When they opted to return, they were instead deported to Siberia, where they were forced to do hard labor. After Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin amnestied almost all Polish deportees, and my grandparents made their way south, spending the remainder of the war in Uzbekistan. When the war ended, they returned to Poland and the wreckage of their community, then decided to start again in America.

They
were
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lucky
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Estate of Rivka Benyamini

Hannan Teitel (center) with his uncle Icok, sister Regina, and father Zindel, in front of the Teitel brewery, Ostrów Mazowiecka, Poland, circa 1938

refrain repeated by Holocaust scholars and others to describe the Polish Jews who survived the war in the Soviet Union. Paradoxically, being deported by Stalin spared them almost certain death under the Nazis. But I don't think my grandparents considered themselves lucky, even in an ironic sense. Physically and emotionally, they were indistinguishable from my grandfather's sister, who survived Auschwitz, or his brother, who spent a year in the Polish forest fighting with a group of partisans. Nevertheless, it felt wrong to call them Holocaust survivors. To the inevitable question—"What camp were they in?"—I had no response: I didn't know the name of the camp they talked about or even exactly where it was. Their story had none of the hallmarks of the Holocaust testimonies I dutifully consumed: no ghettos, no selections for the gas chamber, no death marches.

That uncertainty about where my family history fit into the larger history of the Holocaust stayed with me into adulthood. I knew of only one book that touched on my grandparents' experience: the Polish writer Henryk Grynberg's haunting oral history, *Children of Zion* (1994), which collages dozens of testimonies collected in 1943 from Polish children who were deported to the Soviet Union after the start of the war and later evacuated to Palestine. Yet Grynberg's text, with its elliptical chorus of voices, didn't bring the clarity I sought. Why were my grandparents deported in the first place? And what happened to them in the camp, and afterward, that left such a deep mark?

It is startling to discover in a book written by a stranger answers you have always been seeking, even unconsciously, to the most fundamental personal questions. I experienced this repeatedly over the past year as I pored over several groundbreaking new books chronicling the fate of the quarter-million or so Polish Jews who evaded Hitler only to wind up in the hands of Stalin. From Mikhal Dekel's *In the East*,¹ a hybrid travelogue and family memoir that chronicles the wartime journey of Dekel's father and his family from Poland to Palestine and her effort to follow their traces, I learned the term for the camps in which my grandparents and their compatriots were kept: "special settlements," a division of the Gulag that was separate from the better-known system of camps and penal colonies and sometimes even more deadly. Eliyana R. Adler's *Survival on the Margins*—the first academic book in English to focus on the settlements for Polish Jews, incorporating written testimonies as well as interviews with survivors—confirmed my sense that the deportees have typically been considered beyond the scope of Holocaust scholarship, "in a sort of netherworld of history and memory," and thus neglected by historians.

How is it possible, Adler wonders, that "one chapter of that story was almost entirely displaced by another"? Survivor's guilt is a likely factor: because their relatives and friends back in Poland were murdered in overwhelming numbers, the deportees who survived in the Soviet Union may have felt reluctant to broadcast their own suffering. But there is another factor to consider—one raised by the writer and philosopher Julius Margolin in *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*,² a searing memoir of his five years in Gulag camps that was originally written in Russian in 1946 and 1947 and only just translated into English by Stefani Hoffman.

Margolin, who died in 1971, argues that the Soviet Union's enslavement of millions was integral to the functioning of the Soviet state—a position that many in the West were unwilling to accept at the time, or for a long time after. Stalin—"Uncle Joe" to the American media—had been *Time* magazine's Man of the Year in 1939 and 1942; the Red Army, fighting with the Allies, liberated Auschwitz in January 1945 and helped to inform the world of Hitler's atrocities. "No one

wants to think that we defeated one mass murderer with the help of another,” Anne Applebaum wrote in her comprehensive *Gulag: A History* (2003).

That thought has grown harder and harder to avoid, owing to the ever-increasing number of publications about the crimes of Stalin.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s autobiographical Gulag novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* appeared in 1962, followed eleven years later by the multivolume *Gulag Archipelago*, his now-classic anatomy of the camps. With the gradual (though still incomplete) opening of Soviet archives, Applebaum and others have been able to fill in still more of the picture. It is no longer possible to suggest, as Martin Amis did in *Koba the Dread* (2002), that “nobody knows” about those camps, even if his larger point about Stalin’s crimes—that they have not gripped Western consciousness to the extent that the Holocaust has—still holds. And yet the story of the special settlements has remained almost entirely unexplored. Applebaum notes that another book equal in length to hers would be required to tell it completely; Adler and Dekel attempt only a portion.

Though much of the archival material related to the settlements remains sealed, it is possible to recognize the scope of Stalin’s actions. Starting in the early 1930s with the mass deportation of well-to-do peasants (kulaks), he ravaged the population in the name of industrial development, sending deportees to remote regions and putting them brutally to work. By enslaving as many as six million Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, and other residents of the territories he claimed for the Soviet Union—in addition to millions more of his own citizens—Stalin perpetrated a crime against humanity of drastic and as-yet-unacknowledged proportions, with reverberations into the present and beyond.

When the Nazis invaded Poland on Friday, September 1, 1939, twelve-year-old Hannan Teitel—Mikhal Dekel’s father—was living with his family in Ostrów Mazowiecka, a small town in eastern Poland, where they owned a popular brewery. Margolin, who had emigrated to Palestine with his wife and son three years earlier, had returned to Poland alone to attend to some business at a textile factory in Łódź, a large industrial city in central Poland. My grandfather might have been in the same building: not yet married to my grandmother, he too worked in a textile factory there, though as a manual laborer, not an executive. “Each of us knew that war was inevitable but no one was prepared for it to start tomorrow,” Margolin writes of the mood in Poland that summer in *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*.

The events in Germany over the previous six years had left the Jews of Poland, who numbered around three million before the war, with little doubt regarding the Nazis’ intentions. As the Germans approached Łódź, a mass exodus began. Margolin left with friends by car, heading toward Warsaw and then farther east. My grandfather arrived in

Warsaw with his two brothers the day after Margolin left and was imprisoned there briefly in a garage for locomotives. Each prisoner, my grandfather remembered, was given a piece of bread and a salted herring, causing terrible thirst; there was no water. At night they had to lie “in the mess from the herrings.”

Meanwhile, the Red Army had crossed the border and was occupying eastern Poland. As soon as he could, my grandfather made his way with a horde of other Jewish refugees to Białystok, the largest town in northeastern Poland, with a Jewish majority and a strong Zionist presence. My grandmother soon joined him there. In *Survival on the Margins* Adler quotes a refugee who testified that upon arrival in the town, he “felt like a new man suddenly awakened from a nightmarish dream. No hateful swastikas, no arrogant Nazis, no fear, no limitations on movement!”

But living conditions were desperate; lacking a place to stay, many camped out in synagogues. People seeking friends and family from whom they had been separated plastered the walls of cafés with notes in Polish and Yiddish. In a nearby town, each Jewish family housed and fed seven or eight refugees. An American working for the Joint Distribution Committee reported in November that the efforts to aid refugees constituted “an underground railway system fully comparable to anything I have ever read about in Civil War stories.”

The Soviets’ efforts to solidify control over the occupied territory—and the refugees within it—began at once. After being married by the Soviet administration in Białystok in November 1939, my grandparents were assigned work at a bakery in a village sixty miles away—far enough from the border to make sneaking back across unlikely. Margolin, meanwhile, was taking refuge with his elderly parents in his hometown of Pinsk, now occupied by the Soviets. He tried desperately to acquire a visa that would allow him to return to Palestine and was stymied at each turn: one official claimed not to have the proper authority to issue such a visa; another explained that because the Soviets no longer recognized the Polish state, they could not put an exit visa in his Polish passport. But if he accepted a Soviet passport, as the authorities were already urging the refugees to do, he feared that he would be denied the right to travel at all: “An invisible noose, which every inhabitant of the Soviet country wears, had already been slipped over my neck.”

Dekel reports in *In the East* that on February 19, 1940—which happened to be three days before my grandfather’s twenty-fourth birthday—the NKVD signed a contract with the Soviet All-Union Timber Amalgamation agreeing to provide slave laborers for lumber work. The same month, an announcement appeared in *Der Bialystoker Shtern*, a Yiddish newspaper, requiring all refugees to register with the Soviet authorities. They were offered an ultimatum: they could return to German-occupied Poland or accept a provisional form of Soviet

citizenship that would forbid them indefinitely from living within sixty miles of the Polish border. Taking Soviet citizenship might mean cutting off the option of returning later; declining it constituted surrender to the Gestapo. Many of the refugees—including Dekel's family, Margolin, and my grandparents—registered to return home.

Some refugees later said that by February 1940, time and distance had already dimmed their memories of the Nazis' cruelty. Others simply wanted to be reunited with family members. But conditions in the Soviet-occupied territories were clearly bad enough for the refugees to imagine that even Nazi-occupied Poland could be an improvement. Poles were alarmed by the Soviet soldiers' worn-out clothing and their desire to buy almost anything that was offered for sale—clear signs that the USSR was not the “workers' paradise” it was said to be. Margolin describes being appalled by the inefficiency and inhumanity of the system of assigned labor, as well as by the censorship of written materials: briefly put in charge of sorting through printed matter in a depository, he found one of his own books in the stack. “As late as the spring of 1940,” he writes, “Jews preferred the German ghetto to the Soviet equality of rights.” Unbeknownst to them, the Soviets had already decided to deport and exploit those who signed up for repatriation.

In *The Gulag Archipelago* Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote:

The sharp, nighttime ring or the rude knock at the door, the insolent entrance of the unwiped jackboots of the unsleeping State Security operatives.... The arrested person is torn from the warmth of his bed. He is in a daze, half-asleep, helpless, and his judgment is befogged.

The knock came for Julius Margolin on June 19 at 10 PM. The arresting officer told him he was being taken for a half-hour “conversation” but advised him to bring a coat. At the police station in Pinsk he was forced to undress and surrender his possessions—documents, watch, wedding ring, fountain pen—and then jailed, charged with “violating the passport regime” and “residing on the territory of the Soviet Union without documents.” He was “guilty of being a refugee,” as one officer put it, telling him to forget about his home and his wife: “She'll find someone else.” After six weeks in prison, he was deported at dawn on July 28.

My grandparents never spoke to me about the details of their own deportation, but after reading Dekel's book, I wrote to her in the hope of discovering more. She put me in touch with a Russian researcher who, with a few keystrokes in Cyrillic, found their information in a database of “victims of the political terror in the USSR.” Their “date of conviction” is listed as June 29; their crime is not stated.

Thanks to Dekel's and Adler's books, I now know that the arresting officers encouraged those sent to settlements to believe they were being taken home: they were often allowed to pack large quantities of clothes and household items, as much as two hundred pounds per family. At the train station they were crowded into red cattle cars, known as Red Cows—Solzhenitsyn called them “slave caravans.” These trains “did not need to follow regular train schedules,” Dekel writes, “and could therefore go anywhere and nowhere, into emptiness itself.” After the trains started to move, the prisoners realized they were heading not west but east.

The journey into the Soviet interior could last a month or longer. Initially, many of the passengers had enough to eat, since they had brought provisions. One deportee quoted by Adler recalled that people on his transport tossed their Soviet rations out the window; when they saw peasants picking up the rejected food, they realized how hungry the locals were. The cars had two barred windows each and were empty in the middle, with rows of two-tiered bed boards on each side and either a trough or a hole for a toilet. “After a week of travel, all were sick with dysentery,” Dekel writes. “A terrible stench...rose from the living bodies and the corpses, which remained in the cars until they were hauled out, sometimes at the next stop, sometimes only at the end of the journey.” Margolin describes the sensation of “moving downward, continually downward, underground, away from the world of the living.... We had departed from human memory, from history.”

The Gulag system, Margolin writes in *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, was not merely “a singular method of running a state taking up one sixth of the planet and of controlling a nation that could be kept in submission only in this way.” It also served as a means for the Soviets to develop remote regions of an unimaginably vast land, effectively colonizing their own country: the Gulag was the USSR's “largest construction organization,” in the words of the historian Oleg Khlevniuk. In many cases, the officials in charge of the camps had suffered incarceration or forced resettlement themselves.

At times, the special settlers constituted nearly half the population of the Gulag system: by one estimate, in 1941 there were close to two million prisoners overall in labor camps and colonies and 1.5 million in settlements (sometimes termed “exile villages”). Referring specifically to deportees from eastern Poland, Applebaum cites estimates that 108,000 people were arrested and sent to camps, while 320,000 were deported to settlements.³ The distinction between camps and settlements was not always clear, and there often seemed to be no reason why one person was sent to a camp (as Margolin was) and another to a settlement (like Dekel's father's family and my grandparents). Regardless of their destination, deportees were told that they would never return to Poland. “You'll go home when the entire forest is chopped,” exiles at Dekel's father's settlement heard.

My grandparents said the commandant in charge of their settlement pointed to a nearby river and told them they would return only when the water flowed in the opposite direction.

Like many other deportees, my grandparents called the place they had been taken to “Siberia.” I was stunned to learn from the information my researcher uncovered that their settlement was actually in the Komi Republic, a north-central plateau at the base of the Ural Mountains and a common destination for Polish-Jewish deportees. Adler sees the term “Siberia” as shorthand for the deportees’ sense that they had been sent to the very end of the earth—“exact cartographic distinctions” no longer mattered. “Technically they were not prisoners,” Dekel writes of the deportees; unlike labor camps, the settlements were ordinarily not surrounded by barbed wire or policed by guards. But they were located in such remote regions that there was nowhere to escape to. Some sites were so undeveloped that the arrivals had to build their own barracks. They typically received one or two days of rest a month; otherwise, they were excused from labor only if the temperature reached a certain low—anywhere from 45 to 70 degrees below zero, deportees testified, depending on the region.

The deportees sent to Komi were all put to work in timber. “We chopped down trees,” my grandmother used to say. That is the most either of my grandparents ever told me about their physical suffering. Adler notes that the Polish deportees she has interviewed often “struggle to find the words to describe their lives during this period.” Her and Dekel’s research has enabled me to imagine what my grandparents must have experienced with greater accuracy. As in the camps, the food rations settlers received depended upon their labor. The central administration in Moscow set quotas for performance: those who fulfilled the “norm” (based on the work capability of an average, healthy Russian man) would get the standard ration, while those who exceeded it—“shock workers” or “Stakhanovites”—earned a more generous portion. Those who did not meet the quota were fed less. Adler notes that many questioned the obvious illogic of this system, including a nurse at one settlement who said, “I could not understand what the Russians wanted with all these thousands of Polish citizens—they had to be fed, and the returns from starving workers were minimal.” The luckiest among the deportees received food packages from home—whatever their relatives under German occupation could scrape together—which they could then eat, sell, or trade.

Dekel quotes from a memo sent back to Moscow by an inspector who visited the Komi settlements in the summer of 1940, which notes barracks in dangerously ill repair, living space of only five feet per person, starvation conditions, and a typhus outbreak. In addition to hunger and exhaustion, the exiles suffered from the cold and the heat; from lice, mosquitoes, and bedbugs; and from accidents and illnesses, especially those caused by malnutrition, such as dysentery and night

blindness. Dekel's father testified that 60 percent of the deportees at his settlement lost parts of their fingers or noses to frostbite. In retrospect, I realize that my grandparents never complained of cold or hunger in the everyday way people do.

Dekel can find no reliable data on deaths in the special settlements; Adler estimates the overall mortality rates for Polish deportees at 8 to 10 percent. Soviet records suggest that 20 to 25 percent of all laborers died in exile, while Jewish sources put the death rate in 1941–1942 at between 22 and 28 percent. Traveling through Komi in search of traces of the more than one hundred settlements that were once there, Dekel finds almost nothing. "We know where they were," a local guide tells her. "But after people moved, the barracks crumbled." Visiting a burial ground for camp prisoners in the middle of a forest, Dekel sees "mounds of earth that seemed to stretch on with no end in sight... there were no names, no gravestones." The Komi Republic, she realizes, is "one gigantic, unmarked burial ground."

Like Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz*, Margolin devotes much of his memoir to the straightforward description of camp conditions. At "Square 48," the geographical designation that served as the only name for the logging camp in the Baltic–White Sea Industrial Complex where he was first sent, winters were so cold that trees in the forest cracked and the guards removed the camp's only thermometer "so as not to upset people." The *zeks* were given shoes made "without size or form" from rubber repurposed from old tractor tires, and padded stockings tied with string around padded trousers, with a padded jacket on top; they used towels or rags as scarves. All this padding sometimes ignited as they tried to warm themselves around a bonfire: "Friend, you are burning," they warned each other.

Margolin graphically describes the effects of "alimentary dystrophy," or chronic malnutrition. His weight eventually dropped to ninety-nine pounds; he had difficulty walking, climbing to the upper bunk, or even getting undressed for the night. Rashes appeared on his skin; his bones protruded. The prisoners devised rituals for making meals last longer, adding water to the soup or mixing in bread to make it thicker. They ate anything extra they could find: mustard that the cook smeared onto their fingers, black bread with straw baked into it, rotten scraps of potatoes that pigs left behind. Some prisoners died after eating grass. In 1945 Moscow ordered the camps to stop listing alimentary dystrophy as a cause of death. "The fact that this order was marked top secret indicates its authors' awareness of its shameful meaning," Margolin writes.

As much as it is a testimony to his physical suffering, Margolin's memoir is also a chronicle of his intellectual reckoning with the Soviet system. Not only were he and most of the other Jewish deportees unaccustomed to physical labor, they were refugees, the survivors of earlier pogroms and other trauma. In one brigade he observed, thirty

Galician Hasidim together were unable to fulfill the quota for a single person. The weak were sent out to work alongside the strong, generating competition and animosity. Margolin soon realized that the mismatch between worker and job might be the point. As in Levi's account of Auschwitz, the camp is a world turned upside down: "Teachers carry water, technical workers saw wood, merchants dig up earth." It is heartbreaking to read of Margolin's struggles with a system such as this one, deliberately sadistic and immune to arguments or pleas.

Most of the Polish prisoners were released from the camps and special settlements in August 1941, after Hitler attacked the Soviet Union and Stalin renewed diplomatic relations with Poland. According to the Polish government-in-exile, the number of Poles to be released was 1.2 million, of whom approximately one quarter were Jewish. Jewish sources estimated that the number of Polish Jews in the USSR was larger—between 350,000 and 500,000. Some settlements were so cut off from the world that the news of the amnesty did not reach them for many months. Others learned of it from newspapers that their relatives in Poland had strategically used to wrap parcels. My grandfather, on the day of his amnesty, dared to ask the commandant in charge of his settlement which way the river was running now. Fifty years later, his memory of that moment still brought a triumphant gleam to his eye.



Aaron Yermus/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Polish Jews waiting to board a repatriation train, Kazakhstan, 1946

After nearly two years in prison, the Polish general Władysław Anders was informed by the newly appointed Polish ambassador to the Soviet Union that he was the new commander of the Polish army-in-exile. Emaciated, barefoot, and walking with a cane, he left Moscow's Lubyanka Prison in a chauffeured NKVD car, charged by the Polish

government-in-exile with assembling an army from the recently released Polish citizens to fight the Axis powers. They were to gather in southwestern Russia, near the border with Kazakhstan.

On September 5—the same day that Anders was received by Stalin—Dekel's father and the rest of the Teitels were released from their settlement in Komi. They were assigned to work on a kolkhoz, or collective farm, in Kazakhstan, 2,500 miles away. Prisoners released from camps received a free railway pass and an allowance of fifteen rubles a day, but owing to a loophole in the law, prisoners from the special settlements were not entitled to this treatment. Many of them, including the Teitels, were sent on their way with nothing.

“All of Russia was on the move,” wrote the poet Aleksander Wat, who was among the Polish deportees. At this time the Soviets were in the process of evacuating not just the deportees from Poland and elsewhere but also huge segments of the Soviet population to the interior, fearing mass murder and destruction if Hitler's armies were to advance. Once again, the transports were disastrous. “What had been envisioned as an organized transfer to and resettlement in Soviet Central Asia disintegrated into an uncontrolled, savage exodus of millions,” Dekel writes.

But even amid the chaos, the released Polish citizens stood out in their misery: they traveled for weeks without food, without adequate clothing, without the local language, without knowledge of the laws and regulations.

She quotes a deportee who remembered, “Every day [the Soviets] go up and down the train taking out the bodies.” Thousands of people camped out on the floor of the train station in Arys, Kazakhstan, waiting to receive their travel papers. There was no food, not even for those with goods to trade on the black market. A refugee quoted by Adler described the plaza in front of the Tashkent railway station, filled with people waiting for a train to somewhere else, as “a billowing, raging sea of humanity.”

My grandparents told me only that they spent the remainder of the war years at a kolkhoz near Tashkent; so far I have been unable to discover its name or location. In some of the collective farms, locals ate well and had better living conditions; in most, however, everyone “starved together.” Dekel writes that when her father's family first arrived at their kolkhoz, the children ate live lizards and frogs out of the ponds. At a nearby kolkhoz where other members of the family were sent, Dekel, visiting in 2013, encountered residents whose parents had passed down stories of the refugees: “The Poles were in terrible shape,” one of them told her. “The refugees were too weak to work or even to stand and...many of them just lay down and died.” The locals said that they still prayed for the souls of those who died there, “because of their hunger, because their suffering had been the greatest

we have ever seen.” In one town on the route from Bukhara to Samarkand, a cemetery was established next to the train station, because “the Poles were so weak that they died during or immediately after transport,” an Uzbek caretaker explained to Dekel.

Dekel’s father’s story has a happy ending: together with around a thousand other “Tehran children,” many of them orphans, he was evacuated to Iran in 1942 and then by boat to Palestine with the help of Anders Army personnel. “Whom have you sent us? Corpses or children?” asked one doctor, shocked at their condition. At around the same time, the Anders Army brought more than 100,000 Poles out of Central Asia, taking them via Iran to join the British forces in Palestine and elsewhere. My grandfather hoped to enlist, but he was unable to get to a gathering point before the group left. It was unlikely that he would have been accepted, not only because of his poor physical condition after over a year in a settlement, but also because Anders had a reputation for anti-Semitism. “They will never make good soldiers,” Anders is alleged to have said of the Polish Jews who came to him. The extent to which Anders did or did not help his Jewish compatriots remains disputed.

Margolin, declared an exception, was not amnestied along with the other Poles. Instead, in the summer of 1941 he was transferred to Kruglitsa, a medical settlement in the far northern Arkhangelsk region, where the work was less strenuous. Nonetheless, his condition continued to deteriorate, especially after the winter of 1941–1942. Although he was only in his early forties, other prisoners began calling him “Grandpa,” testimony to his premature aging. “My hearing declined and my eyes dimmed,” he writes in *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*. “The only thing remaining was an animal terror of the freezing cold and physical pain.” Eventually he stopped receiving mail from his mother back in Pinsk, who had not only been sending him food packages but also had served as a go-between for letters from his wife. Later he learned that she was murdered by the Nazis when the Pinsk ghetto was liquidated in October 1942.

By the winter of 1943, Margolin had become a “goner,” camp parlance for prisoners who had lost the will to live. (Levi and others have described long-term prisoners at Auschwitz in similar terms.) “I was like someone who had fallen off a ship into the sea,” he writes. He found himself envying people who died at home in their beds, heroes who died on the battlefield, even a dog who could die in a kennel: “Our deaths were many times more hideous and agonizing.”

A doctor intervened on Margolin’s behalf: he was declared an invalid and sent to the hospital to recover. This status, which allowed him to be excused from work, enabled him to survive another year in the camp. But in the spring of 1944 there was a labor shortage. Along with a group of other Poles, he was transferred to Vorkuta, a mining camp beyond the Arctic Circle notorious for its dangerous conditions.

Miraculously, at a transit camp along the way, he encountered the same doctor who had saved him in Kruglitsa, who hospitalized him again and shared his own ration with Margolin. He survived and was released on June 21, 1945.

Margolin wrote his sprawling book in ten months after his return to his family in Palestine in 1946, desperate to bring the world's attention to his story. But the world was not receptive to it. Locally, his anti-Soviet message met with opposition from Jewish socialists as well as others who believed that Soviet support was necessary for the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Excerpts appeared in *Le Figaro* in 1949, followed shortly by an abridged French version of the memoir titled *La condition inhumaine: Cinq ans dans les camps de concentration soviétiques* (The Inhuman Condition: Five Years in Soviet Concentration Camps). In 1952 an abridged edition in Russian was published in New York. The book was not distributed in Israel but was smuggled around the USSR.

By 2010, when the first complete edition of Margolin's memoir was finally published, in French, many other accounts of the Gulag had long since appeared. Nevertheless, just as the flood of information in 1945 about Hitler's camps drowned out the experiences of the Soviet refugees, so too has the narrative of Germany as the greatest villain of World War II come to dominate the way in which we perceive the Soviet Union. One friend to whom I mentioned all of this repeated the usual mantra about the Polish Jews who survived the war in the USSR: "They were the lucky ones." Another joked that reading about the Gulag must be a nice break from the Holocaust research that constitutes my current book project.

The question I find myself returning to is whether it is possible to measure suffering. A dictator's evil is usually defined by the number of people he killed. By sheer number of victims, Stalin would come out ahead, but Hitler killed a higher percentage of those who passed through his hands. Yet death is surely an incomplete metric for human misery. Margolin felt no reluctance to draw an equivalence between the two dictators. "We looked at the well-groomed beards, the golden pince-nez, at the mountain of baggage, and we imagined what would happen to all this tomorrow, when they would force them to go by foot for hundreds of kilometers," he writes of a group of Lithuanian Jews bound for Square 48.

Later, we heard that only a few of these people survived the camp. The Dutch and Belgian Jews who were transported in passenger trains to the gas chambers of Auschwitz must have looked just like these Lithuanians. In Auschwitz, their agony ended on the very day of their arrival. These people waited years in camp. Whose death was easier; who knows?

Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)—published two years before Stalin’s death, when the Gulag was still fully in operation—called the fate of his millions of victims a “symmetrical phenomenon” to Nazism. In his foreword to Margolin’s memoir, Timothy Snyder notes that there is no Soviet counterpart that we know of to the Nazi death factories of Birkenau, Chełmno, Bełżec, and Majdanek, but he echoes Margolin in pointing out that the Soviet system was “older, larger, and more durable.” Regardless of the similarities to the Nazi system, what happened in the Soviet camps must be understood in its own historical context—but we cannot assess what we do not know. Until the KGB archives are fully open to researchers, Stalin’s crimes will remain incompletely examined.

What is most haunting about these books isn’t just their excavation of a little-known aspect of the Gulag. It’s the fear they raise of what horrors we close our eyes to today, just as the world all but ignored the Gulag. Perhaps, as I write these words, a person somewhere is being taken away in a contemporary equivalent of the Red Cows, vowing like Julius Margolin that someday the world will know their story. I think of the Uighurs subjected to forced labor in China, producing cotton that might have been used to make my clothing. I think of Alexei Navalny, the Russian activist imprisoned since February in a high-security labor camp sixty miles east of Moscow. I think of all the others whose stories I do not know.

Ruth Franklin

Ruth Franklin’s most recent book, *Shirley Jackson: A Rather Haunted Life*, won the 2016 National Book Critics Circle Award in Biography. (October 2021)

1. Originally published in hardcover as *Tehran Children: A Holocaust Refugee Odyssey* (Norton, 2019). ↵
2. *Zek*, from the abbreviation *z/k*, stands for *zakliuchennyi*, convict. ↵
3. There is no precise data on exactly how many people were arrested in eastern Poland by Soviet authorities between September 1939 and June 1941. “Regardless of the exact number,” Katherine R. Jolluck writes in her introduction to Margolin’s memoir, “it is clear that hundreds of thousands of civilians never charged with any crimes were torn from their homes and exiled by administrative decree,” as part of an intentional process to destroy Poland and Sovietize the territory. ↵